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Why online retailers should take another look at mainframe computers

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The new IBM mainframe is specifically targeted at transaction-heavy industries like e-commerce.

Have you ever noticed that technology is the only realm where the word “legacy” carries a negative connotation – something that’s inefficient, outdated or not worth investing in? Consider the mainframe – for years, IT circles have been predicting or even encouraging its demise. However the mainframe has remained firmly entrenched, and continues to be used by 71 percent of global Fortune 500 companies.

In fact, the IBM z13 mainframe announced last year was specifically targeted at transaction-heavy sites like retail e-commerce, which face exploding mobile transaction volumes. In IBM’s own words, the z13 is the first system designed for the mobile economy, capable of processing 2.5 billion transactions per day, the equivalent of 100 Cyber Mondays every day, 365 days a year. The system combined this strength with real-time encryption and embedded analytics, allowing sites to achieve deep transactional insights 17 times faster than other solutions. No other platform delivers the scalability, reliability and overall performance levels that retail e-commerce sites demand. Does that sound like something that should be ignored?

If you're a retail e-commerce IT executive considering the arguments against the mainframe – that they're old, expensive, incapable of running modern apps, and facing a skills shortage – consider the following reality check:

- *Old* – Mainframes process roughly 30 billion business transactions daily. Over 220 billion lines of mainframe application code are in use today. This doesn't sound like a technology that's going away anytime soon.
- *Expensive* – Mainframes have been proven to be more cost-effective than commodity server infrastructures, particularly in industries like retail e-commerce which are facing exploding transaction volumes resulting from mobile.
- *Incapable of Running Modern Apps* – Behind the most cutting edge front-end mobile/web application is a transaction reaching back to a mainframe. According to a recent CIO survey, 81 percent expect their mainframes to continue to evolve, running more new and different workloads than five years ago. One area to watch is Big Data. New open source solutions are allowing users to incorporate mainframe data into larger Big Data initiatives. In addition, predictive analytics are known to be more effective the “closer” they are conducted to actual transactions. Not only can the mainframe deliver the computing muscle that advanced analytics require, but by applying analytics to actual transactions as they occur (versus taking the time and risk to move transactional data to another platform for analysis), increased shopper engagement can happen in real-time.
- *Skills are Scarce* – It is true that many mainframe experts are retiring, but it's also true that learning COBOL, the most common coding language for mainframe applications, can be easily learned by today's multilingual developers. The retail e-commerce world is increasingly multi-platform, with mobile/web apps connecting to transactional mainframes. The most sought after developer is one that can toggle between the distributed and mainframe worlds and be an expert in their associated programming languages.

In short, mainframes play a key role in the modern application delivery chain. Retail e-commerce development teams need to view working with the mainframe as a lucrative, rewarding opportunity to support their organizations' most mission-critical, revenue-generating work. The beauty is, there's no need to “choose” between a mainframe and distributed career. Modern developers in retail e-commerce organizations can have both.

So the relevant question is not, “how can we best ignore the mainframe?” but instead, “how do we more broadly include it in our efforts to innovative?” Leading companies are leveraging the strengths of the platform while evolving its tools and processes to keep pace with the demands of modern application development and delivery:

New Tools: This is an especially propitious time as a major revolution is taking place in mainframe tooling, making them more accessible and comfortable. Mainframe interfaces are no longer arcane “green screens” but provide the same IDE for applications whether they are written in COBOL or Java. Visually intuitive tools with advanced built-in intelligence now insulate developers from some of the underlying idiosyncrasies of the platform —enabling them to fully exercise their programming/design skills without having to take on a years-long learning curve.

More Efficient: Leading enterprises are hosting more cost-efficient workloads on the mainframe and minimizing mainframe licensing costs. New integrations include the mainframe in core IT initiatives like application performance management (APM) to help IT identify opportunities for mainframe code optimizations that can have a significant, positive impact on the user experience as well as costs. Software vendors are also working hard to integrate their tools with popular Agile/DevOps tools so IT can make fast, easy and accurate updates to mainframe code; pinpoint performance bottlenecks; put any developer to work on any application—keeping up with the pace of DevOps.

More Secure: Finally, with mainframes housing such precious intellectual property for retail e-commerce shops, new approaches are evolving to better safeguard their already highly secure mainframe data and applications. By identifying “insider” and “privileged access” threats; understanding which employees are accessing specific applications and data, when the access occurred, how often; and masking sensitive data wherever possible, security is enhanced while reducing costs related to PII compliance.

So the next time you hear, “the mainframe is irrelevant,” take a deeper look at how the platform can evolve to keep pace with your accelerating needs. The future of the mainframe is actually quite bright. Retail e-commerce teams need to focus on rejuvenating this critical platform and leveraging it to support robust business goals, revenue generation, better-informed decisions and stronger, more profitable customer experiences.

Compuware provides software for managing mainframe applications, data and operations.

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